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Title: Young children's social class identities in everyday life at primary school: the importance of naming and challenging complex inequalities

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Young children's social class identities in everyday life at primary school: the importance of naming and challenging complex inequalities

Abstract:

This article explores young children's social class identities in the context of a Scottish primary school, highlighting the ambivalent institutional discourses around 'diversity' and social class in the school context. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with 5-7 year-olds, it shows the emotional and embodied aspects through which social class differences are performed in the children's intra- and intergenerational interactions, and the implications for the children's relationships and experiences in school. The study shows that practitioners need to name and address social class differences, in intersection with gender, race and ethnicity, and involve young children themselves in discussions about identities and inequalities.

Keywords: young children's social class identities, children's relationships, primary schools, 'diversity' discourses, emotions, inequality

In recent years, socio-economic inequalities have remained persistently high in Scotland, the context of this research, as well as in the rest of the United Kingdom (McKendrick et al., 2014). In addition, austerity politics across Europe have affected the lives of children and young people disproportionately through reduced family incomes and cutbacks in welfare, education and health services (Ruxton, 2012; Chzhen, 2014; Shildrick, 2015). This means that social class, which I conceptualize here as *rooted* in economic and material inequalities and *lived* as cultural practices

which are ascribed symbolic values and meanings (Skeggs, 1997), remains a key factor for shaping the lives of children from an early age.

Despite the importance of class, the views of *young* children in particular on social class differences, and the ways in which these shape their experiences and relationships in everyday life at school, have been relatively absent from research. In what follows, I begin with a reflexive discussion of the history of research on social class and childhood, commenting on the various ways in which children's social class identities have been conceptualized and framed theoretically in this literature. In the subsequent sections on research background and findings I situate this study in a feminist poststructuralist understanding of social identities as *performed* in specific contexts which are discursively shaped by power and relational dynamics. When talking about class identities as performed, I do not imply that they should be understood as willful, intentional or fully conscious 'acts' or choices, but rather as produced within the parameters of various discourses on the identities that are available to children in specific circumstances (Butler, 1990).

This article contributes to the field of childhood studies, and to wider sociological discussions of social class, by showing that young children are not only aware of social class differences, but that these differences are integral to shaping their lives at school. Young children themselves participate in how class differences come into existence through emotional and embodied performances, which are framed by ambivalent institutional discourses around social class in the school context and classed intra- and intergenerational interactions.

How social class shapes children's lives: social reproduction, parents and schooling

Research that has explored the relevance of social class for children's everyday lives has predominantly been conceptually framed by social reproduction or Bourdieusian approaches, paying particular attention to the role of parents and schooling in this process. This kind of work has highlighted the everyday cultural practices through which social class shapes children's lives, e.g. by exploring how patterns of daily structures differ between working and middle class children (Lareau, 2003).

Much attention has been given to the role of parents in social class reproduction processes, e.g. through practices of 'concerted cultivation' (Lareau, 2003: 8), 'enrichment activities' such as sport and music education, and through facilitating children's friendships (Vincent and Maxwell, 2015). Bourdieusian approaches, adopted by many of these studies, lend themselves to exploring families' possession and activation of different types of *capital*, and have shown how 'class-based distinctions and identifications are realised within the everyday interweaving of diverse tapestries of behaviour' (Vincent et al., 2008: 8).

Research has also shown complex relationships between social class and schooling, in terms of links between class and educational attainment (Raffo et al., 2007; Reay, 2006), parental assertiveness and involvement (Whitty, 2001), school choice and the marketization of the education system (Ball, 2003; Reay and Lucey, 2000), and parents' and children's different normative and emotional attitudes towards education

(Reay, 2006). The intersections between class, race and gender in these processes have been highlighted (Ball et al., 2013).

To a lesser extent, research has investigated how children themselves are implicated in such reproduction processes, e.g. by being more (or less) assertive in relationships with peers and educators (Streib, 2011: 8). Indeed, it has been argued that social reproduction and social capital approaches tend to downplay children's agency, overemphasise the influence (and responsibility) of parents and adults, and neglect to explore how children contribute to the shaping of their own environments (Morrow, 1999; Davis, 2007). Feminist critiques have also stressed that Bourdieusian frameworks tend to neglect other aspects of difference, such as gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity (Lovell, 2000) and thus risk reproducing whiteness and maleness uncritically (McCall, 1992; Rollock, 2014). More recent Bourdieusian childhood research has therefore recognized how children themselves can contribute to the ways in which capitals come to be constructed and valued (Alanen et al., 2015), and to the ways in which different aspects of identities intersect with class (Connolly, 1998).

What do we know about children's own views about social class?

The earliest attempts at studying children's perceptions and identities of social class date back to the 1950s. Such research consisted of positivist approaches which tried to assess whether children were able to identify their own and others' social class 'correctly' by using questionnaires or strongly structured interviews (Stendler, 1949; Centres, 1950; Himmelweit et al., 1952; Jahoda, 1959). Social class was conceptualised through the idea of clearly distinguishable working, middle and upper

classes, defined through income and occupational status of parents. While these studies aimed to explore children's perceptions of class, in fact they assumed children's knowledges to be *inferior* to those of adults: in most cases, if children's perceptions of their own social class positions did not match the adult researchers' assessments, they were simply judged as incorrect. While such research may strike as simplistic and ethically contentious today, conceptual and methodological elements of it still prevail. For example, it is still common for researchers to predefine social class markers and seek children's views on them. This takes the form, for example, of showing children photographs of houses which are assumed to represent different social classes (Weinger, 2000; Horgan, 2009), and assessing what assumptions children make about the people living inside.

While this kind of research can be useful for understanding to what extent children are aware of and participating in social discourses and stereotyping about social class differences, it runs the risk of reproducing exactly such stereotypes, by employing hierarchical conceptualizations of social class with highly normative implications. Such studies also assume class identity to be static and fixed, and children's social class identities to be predetermined by their families and environments.

In recent years, children's views on social class have been explored through more child-centred approaches. Such research has, for example, explored children's views about living in poverty (Ridge, 2002), the views of children from wealthy backgrounds (Johnson and Hagerman, 2006) or contrasted the views of children from well-off and disadvantaged backgrounds (Backett-Milburn et al., 2003; Sutton et al., 2007). There is a tendency to focus on middle childhood and youth (from 8 years

onwards) in these studies, and the views of younger children have generally not been sought – illustrating, perhaps, a tendency to view young children as too innocent, or incompetent, to be concerned by or knowledgeable about social class (Kustatscher, 2015). A commonality between the children's views in all these studies is that all children, regardless of their backgrounds, made efforts to locate themselves on a middle ground in terms of social class. This resonates with Savage et al.'s (2001: 889) findings from research with adults, who overwhelmingly positioned themselves as 'normal', 'ordinary' or 'just themselves'. However, as Savage et al. suggest, this very stressing of the 'normal' suggests that there is some kind of 'other' in relation to which this ordinariness is performed, and thus social class appears to be present and relevant implicitly. Economic realities featured strongly in children's views about class, but children also repeatedly pointed out the significance of other aspects: relationships with family and peers, emotional well-being and issues around participation (however, these aspects can be shaped by material circumstances too). Recurrently, school appeared as a key site where classed differences came to life, for example in terms of access to clothing and sweets, or participation in school trips and projects (Ridge, 2002; Backett-Milburn et al., 2003; Sutton et al., 2007).

This article adds to this literature by showing that social class differences are integral to the experiences and relationships of young children in the school context, and that young children actively engage in performing such differences. It also addresses the importance of institutional discourses and intergenerational relationships that work to evoke social class in particular ways, and generate significant silences about some aspects of diversity. First, I turn to explaining the research background of the study.

Research background: an ethnographic study in a ‘socially and culturally diverse’ Scottish primary school

This article draws on an ethnographic study conducted in a primary school in a Scottish city. The overall purpose of the research was to explore the ways in which young children perform their social class, gender and ethnic identities in the context of a primary school. Over the course of a school year, I spent eight months (4-5 days a week) as a participant observer with the 25 children (aged 5-7) and staff of one school class within the spaces of the school and on trips, generating data in the form of fieldnotes, interviews with children and staff, a reflexive research diary and various school and policy documents. The research received ethical approval through the University of Edinburgh Ethics Committee and by the department of education services of the city council in which the study took place. Informed consent was sought from children, parents and educational staff and steps were taken to allow for the ongoing nature of consent and confidentiality (Kustatscher, 2014). Analysis involved multiple phases of systematically organising and revisiting the data, writing and re-writing. A thematic coding process was applied, looking for commonalities, silences, deviant or striking examples in order to ensure robustness of findings (see Kustatscher, 2015, for further discussion of the research process).

The school of this research, Greenstone Primary¹, served a catchment area comprising a broad social and cultural mix, describing itself as a ‘multicultural’ and ‘diverse’ school². School ethnographers with an interest in social identities often collect data

¹ The name of the school and all participants have been substituted with pseudonyms.

² The school’s catchment area was characterized by a high socio-economic diversity (according to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation). Insights from the fieldwork confirmed the impression of a relatively broad socio-economic mix in the class of this research. For example, parents’ occupations (as

from children's parents with regards to their occupations and income, and ethnic markers such as nationality, religion or language. In this study I decided not to collect such information for various reasons. *First*, the main focus of this research was on how *children* perform their social identities, which is, of course, different from asking a parent or carer to provide information about their children and families. I also wanted to avoid a static labeling of social identities through parental descriptors (e.g. describing a child as female, Pakistani and middle-class), but rather recognize the shifting and performed nature of identities. *Second*, classifying children's social identities through their parents' or teachers' descriptions would also imply that adult knowledge is held superior to children's knowledges, a stance that I was trying to avoid. *Third*, 'not knowing' about the children's backgrounds also meant that as a researcher I was placed somewhat on a par with the children in terms of information held about each others' lives outwith school. This does not mean that as an adult researcher I could ever view the world in the same way as children do, or that I would be unbiased about any information disclosed about a child's family background. However, the very act of disclosing information – whether by children or staff, whether initiated by a child or on my inquiry – can be seen as a way of performing social identities, infused with power dynamics, and thus became part of the data. For example, the fact that some children stressed their religion, others their nationality, and others again their parents' professions became an indicator of how they performed their social identities and what aspects were salient for different children at different times. The notion of *performing* is thus useful for emphasizing that social identities are produced under specific circumstances in particular moments (Butler, 1990).

named by the children) included: checkout assistants, GPs, beauty salon employees, academics and unemployed.

In the following three sections, I present the key findings in relation to children's social class identities in school. Drawing on staff interviews, I begin by outlining the institutional discourses around 'diversity' in Greenstone Primary, and the ambivalent place that social class holds within these discourses. I then go on to analyse how social class differences become marked for children in the school context. Finally, I discuss the embodied and emotional implications that social class differences, and their investment with values and status, have for young children's relationships.

***"We're all just a family"* – the ambivalent place of social class in institutional 'diversity' discourses**

As outlined above, schools and their intergenerational relationships are key sites of where social class differences become pronounced and reproduced. Despite a general agreement in the literature on this, however, this study uncovered an ambivalent discourse among educational staff about the relevance of social class in children's lives at school, and about the role of schools and staff in addressing this.

As mentioned earlier, staff at Greenstone Primary referred to the school as a diverse and multicultural institution, and continuing efforts were made to 'celebrate diversity' through multicultural and (some) anti-racist practices. However, such practices focused mainly on celebrating different ethnic backgrounds, nationalities, languages and cultural practices (such as foods and festivities), and much less on aspects of race, gender or social class. When asked about the relevance of social class in interviews, staff agreed that Greenstone Primary's pupils come from a wide variety of social class

backgrounds, but differed on the relevance of this for the children's experiences in school:

I think there is a diversity in the social class background. Which I think is quite a good thing as well... All of our children mix, you know, it doesn't seem to matter what class or what background they come from. I don't know about *after* school, but *in* the school and in the playground, no... I think it's fine. I think the children ... you know the social part of it, children aren't always aware of it, maybe.

(Interview with Support Staff)

The interviewee holds an ambivalent view of social class differences in the school: on the one hand, she acknowledges that they *do* exist, and suggests that this contributes to a positive experience for the children, but on the other hand she also suggests that children are not aware of social class differences and "mix" regardless of class backgrounds. The problem, if there is one, is located elsewhere ("I don't know about *after* school, but *in* school it's fine") and this view was also exhibited in interviews with other staff:

I think actually I do have quite a broad mix. It's not heavy one way or the other. And certainly, over the years, I mean not just talking about the experience here [in Greenstone Primary] I have seen that actually having an effect. Particularly if you've got quite well-to-do parents, and they maybe would perceive other children in a certain way. And that can transpire to the child. And because of the information and the reaction that they're getting from the parents socially, they would maybe avoid playing with certain children. I have seen that happen.

(Interview with Teaching Staff)

Again, the interviewee is aware of potential effects of social class differences on children's relationships in schools; however, she does not locate this problem at Greenstone Primary. Similar to the previous quote, she also assumes children to be rather passive or innocent when it comes to noticing or performing social class differences. While she admits that class *can* have an effect on children's peer relationships, she locates the cause for this effect with prejudiced attitudes of "well-to-do parents", indicating a view of children as passive sponges of social class prejudice ("that can transpire to the child"). However, she quickly goes on to elaborate on the situation in Greenstone Primary:

Uhm, not necessarily here, I think, because we've got a much wider diversity here. And I think we're very lucky in this school that we have such a *wide* diversity that you don't get so much of the class differentiation quite so much... In a culturally and class-mixed school, you don't get that nearly as much... Because there is such a diversity, it's neither one thing or the other, and I think that helps. Nobody is from an upper class family, nobody is from a middle class family, nobody is from a lower class family. We're all just a family. (Interview with Teaching Staff)

The interviewee asserts that social class is not a factor for children's relationships in the school, for two reasons: First, because the social class mix in itself is so diverse that it becomes less important for the children and, second, because the wide 'cultural' diversity in Greenstone Primary distracts from its social class diversity. This certainly resonates with my observations of an institutional discourse of 'celebrating diversity' in the school, in line with local and national educational and 'diversity'

policies. This multicultural discourse, and the way in which it is performed by staff, highlights certain dimension of ethnic diversity, and tends to mute other differences, such as class, gender and race. The way in which Greenstone Primary is depicted as an exemplary case in contrast to ‘other’ schools in which social class is a factor for peer exclusion processes reminds of a ‘no problem here’ attitude as described in critical multicultural education literature (Ward and Eden, 2009: 142). She describes the school as a friendly and inclusive environment (“we’re all just a family”), which can be interpreted as an aspirational egalitarian discourse.

The above interview excerpts illustrate a tendency of staff to downplay the importance of social class for the children’s relationships at school. However, in other conversations it became clear that staff were well aware of the different resources, skills and networks that children have access to based on their social class backgrounds, and saw it as the school’s responsibility to mediate these. For example, staff actively sought to create opportunities for all children to take part in trips, such as to the theatre or farms, and were able to accommodate parents who struggled financially with the costs of such events.

This demonstrated that staff were clearly not blind to social class differences and their relevance for the children’s experiences in school, but rather sought to downplay social class differences due to a fear of stigmatising children by making deficit assumptions:

For me it’s very important to see the individual, not to make decisions, he’s from a deprived home, so he’s like that. ‘Cause that’s not the case, and I *know* that’s

not the case, and I want to give that strong message to every child that I don't make that assumption. (Interview with Senior Management Staff)

Thus, many staff perceived the school's role to be one of mediating, or counteracting, such differences, by providing the *same* opportunities and experiences to all children and treating everyone *in the same way*. Staff thus experienced a tension between trying to be considerate of social class differences, on the one hand, and not wanting to be biased or prejudiced on the basis of them, on the other hand. In practice, this produced complex challenges of being sensitive to and considerate of social class differences, whilst at the same time not marking them explicitly. The following section gives some insights into how this tension played out in peer and intergenerational interactions at the school, and how it framed the children's performances of class in particular ways.

***"I don't think my mum has a lot of food"* – the marking of social class differences in everyday life at school**

In everyday life at school social class differences manifest themselves regularly, such as in the following example of a conversation in the classroom. This requires staff to think on their feet and respond quickly:

The class is discussing an upcoming school trip to a farm, and the teacher invites questions about it.

There are many questions, such as: "Where will the driver from the bus go? Will there be a toilet?"

Ms Brown answers them all patiently.

Brenda: *“What happens if we have school lunch?”*

Ms Brown: *“You can’t have school lunch that day, you have to take a packed lunch.”*

Carla raises her hand: *“I don’t think my mum has a lot of food!”*

Ms Brown: *“Oh...”*

It looks as if she is just remembering that some children are receiving free school meals³. She says: *“Yes, if you get packed lunch on a Friday then you have to tell me and I will organise you a packed lunch! Who is it that has packed lunch on a Friday?”*

(Children whose parents claim free school meals get to take their packed lunch home on Fridays, since school finishes at noon then – so this is a way to enquire about who is receiving free school meals.)

Carla, Amy and Asya raise their hands, and **Ms Brown** takes a note.

Laura: *“Do we have to dress in home clothes?”*

Ms Brown hesitates for a moment and says: *“Probably school uniform is the best thing.”*

Aamil: *“Yeah, that’s the best thing to be wearing.”*

[Excerpt from fieldnotes]

The conversation illustrates the practical implications of class-based resources for children’s experiences in school and shows how generally popular events, such as a school trip, can be stressful for children from low-income families (Shropshire and Middleton, 1999; Ridge, 2002). In this example, the teacher seems not aware, until Carla points it out, that bringing their own lunch on a trip can be difficult for some

³ At the time of this research, children from families who were living on a low income were able to claim ‘free school meals’, and this can therefore be seen as an indicator for low-income families. Since January 2015, the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 stipulates that all children in P1-3 receive free school meals.

families. Carla's statement is a stark reminder of how growing food poverty in the UK impacts on children's everyday lives (Cooper et al., 2014).

The teacher reacts quickly by enquiring who else is in the same situation and promising to solve it. She does this quite smoothly without delving into or making explicit the underlying economic resources. However, the topic seems to have reminded Laura of asking whether they "have to" dress in home clothes. This phrasing suggests that she would rather wear her school uniform. Normally, on trips outside of school children are allowed to wear their "home clothes", which is generally welcomed with enthusiasm. The teacher, presumably aware of Laura's phrasing and sensitized through Carla's previous statement, decides that they should wear school uniforms, which is also favoured by Aamil.

The interaction is an example of how social class differences become marked and are addressed by the teacher through a 'smoothing out' strategy. Carla appears very confident to state that availability of food is an issue for her family, and on this occasion I did not get a sense, as a researcher, that she felt stigmatized or ashamed to make the statement. While Carla clearly voices a material issue, the teacher, on the other hand, addresses the problem without explicitly naming social class, or poverty, as a factor. This raises the question whether the teacher, by not naming what is happening (presumably in an attempt to be considerate), implicitly also demonstrates that one should not talk about issues to do with class or poverty – such as lack of food, money, access to resources. Eventually, what children may learn through such interactions, is that social class differences need to be 'overlooked' rather than named,

and this silencing may ultimately contribute to the creation of stigma around social class differences and work to oppress, rather than address, social class inequalities.

The example highlights how children constantly need to negotiate multiple differences in school, and negotiate a complex balance between fitting in and standing out. In everyday life at school, class-based differences became marked through material objects and their symbolic meanings, for example when it came to wearing coats of a certain brand or other highly classed and gendered objects, such as lunch boxes or school bags, which impacted on the children's standing within their peer groups. In the following section, I explore the emotional and embodied implications of such performances of classed differences.

Emotional and embodied performances of class in children's peer relationships

Finally, in this section I show how social class differences are evoked and performed in emotional and embodied ways in the children's peer interactions, with clear implications for the children's relationships.

On the school playground during the morning break, I join Laura and Eleanor on a bench where they eat their snacks.

Laura has a yogurt in a plastic cup in the shape of a football.

I say: "*Oh wow, is that a yogurt*"?

Laura nods and smiles proudly.

Eleanor, sitting next to us, says in a strict tone: "*Actually that yogurt is not good for children because it doesn't have the good milk in it!*"

I assume she is right on some level, since the yogurt looks quite cheap – as usual,

Laura's snacks consist of value-brand crisps and the yogurt. I wonder if Eleanor's parents (who are both doctors, as she often mentions) told her in the supermarket that this wasn't healthy.

Eleanor starts to eat her carrot sticks.

I have the impression that Laura is now eying her yogurt with less enthusiasm.

[Excerpt from fieldnotes]

The example illustrates the embodied, emotional and normative processes entailed in performing classed identities. Laura's yogurt becomes the subject of Eleanor's negative judgement: although with its toy-shaped packaging it is marketed at children (at boys?), Eleanor deplores it as "not good for children because it doesn't have the good milk in it". She recognises the yogurt as being labelled with a low-budget brand, and draws on differences in perceptions of healthy nutrition and her knowledge on what is "good for children", which she performs as superior to Laura's knowledge. Eleanor's choice of words such as "not good for children" and "not the good milk" give the interaction a highly normative dimension. She performs a particular idea of what constitutes "good" ingredients and is "good" for children. Between the lines she implies that "good" children are produced by "good" yogurt, highlighting the embodied nature of classed identities. She distances herself from the symbolism of the object, and appears almost disgusted by it. In many other situations I have witnessed how Eleanor used the professional status of both her parents as doctors in order to substantiate her claims, and thus draws on social discourses of valuable and important professions, who have the power to define what counts as "good".

Eleanor's verdict on the yogurt has relational implications. My positive acknowledgement of the yogurt gives attention to Laura and creates a momentary

bond between us, and allows her to gain positive recognition for the unusual appearance of her snack. By debasing the yogurt, Eleanor also devalues this relationship and dynamic of recognition between Laura and me. At the same time she assumes a superior position – in terms of her knowledge and moral position – and indeed in other situations of the fieldwork I observed her to take a dominant role in her relationship with Laura, and with other children. When analyzing my own role in the conversation, I am emotionally drawn to support Laura's position, but I do find myself siding with Eleanor's normative judgement on the yogurt. This illustrates the power of her performance that circulates in ways that involve not only children, but also myself and other adults.

Performing classed identities through embodied and normative processes was common in the children's interactions during my fieldwork. This did not only entail conversations such as the above, which often revolved around particular objects (coats, lunch boxes, accessories, toys) or practices (e.g. where families went on holidays, birthday parties or presents) but were also performed in more abstract interactions, such as through role-play.

An example of this was a game of role-play among a group of girls, which evolved over the course of a few days on the school's playground during break time. The group of about five girls regularly played together, and on one occasion they developed a game called 'maids and princesses'. The game involved three highly classed and gendered roles: one 'queen', who was overseeing the group and stayed relatively detached from the game itself, a group of 'princesses', and a group of 'maids'. It was the task of the maids to catch the princesses, and so the role-play

turned into a game of ‘tag’ in which those who were assigned the role of maid had to run after and catch those who were assigned the role of princesses. The roles of princesses and queens were generally extremely popular with many girls in the class. Princesses seemed to symbolize the intersections between femininity, youth, beauty, affluence and power. The role of ‘maid’, on the other hand, was seen as undesirable in its classed and gendered quality, and was resisted by most girls in the group. In practice, this led to interactions such as the following:

A cluster of girls stand in a corner of the playground and I join them. Tahira is the leader (queen) today, she stands on a wooden bench, with the other girls around her on the ground, and she is just distributing roles. She decides who can be a princess and who has to be a maid – but all the girls want to be princesses.

Tahira says: *“Okay, some people will need to do two jobs!”*

I ask: *“What’s the other job?”*

Tahira says: *“A servant!”*

Tahira first tells **Asya**, then **Amy**, to be a servant, but they almost start to cry, so she allows them to be princesses.

It almost seems that the game cannot be started. Then **Claire** volunteers to be the servant, and **Tahira** shouts: *“Okay, you have to clean!”*

Evie says she will be a maid too.

The game starts, and the maids/servants have to catch the princesses.

[Excerpt from fieldnotes]

On this day, Tahira has taken ownership of the game. Consistent with other observations of her popular status, she asserts her position with such confidence that other children are not questioning it. Her authority is enhanced further through the

physically elevated position of standing above the others. After a few days of playing ‘maids and princesses’, the game has reached an impasse: the role of maid has become ‘sticky’ (Ahmed, 2014) with unpopularity, due to its classed and gendered inferiority as well as through the stigma of ‘being it’, i.e. having to catch others as part of a game of tag.

Since everybody wants to be a princess, Tahira offers a compromise of doing ‘two jobs’, but to the children the roles of princess and maid seem irreconcilable within one person. Tahira also changes the role of ‘maid’ to that of ‘servant’, and by connecting it with the concrete task of (fictional) cleaning she distances it from the fairytale world and converges it with a real-world context of classed inferiority and degradation. In fact, the ‘maid/servant’ has now become so sticky with negative emotions – disgust, fear, shame, humiliation – that Asya and Amy almost cry when threatened with it. Finally, in order to save the game, Claire volunteers to be a servant, and Evie joins her in being a maid. By saving the game, Claire’s performance of the servant is invested with dignity, and this is consolidated when Evie teams up with her. Through assuming an honourable role by saving the game, by embracing it voluntarily with their heads held high and by forming a team, Evie and Claire manage to transform the sticky role of the maid into an acceptable one.

The performances available to the children within the game are shaped by relationships beyond the game – Evie and Claire often operate as a ‘best friend’ dyad, which protects them from being excluded, and generally assume confident positions. Amy and Asya, on the other hand, carry a stigma of being excluded observed on

previous occasions and this makes them vulnerable to being assigned an unpopular role within this game, perpetuating their already excluded status.

Although performed as a game, such interactions are not trivial, but can be seen as ‘dramatic performances’ (Thorne, 1993) of serious and power-infused social relations of class and gender. In addition, even though the girls involved in the game are from different ethnic and racial backgrounds, a hierarchical whiteness is also implied in the particular roles of the game (e.g. in representations of princesses as white (Mac Naughton et al., 2009)). While the girls do not assume any ‘real world’ roles of maids, servants or princesses, through their performances they evoke how such roles are seen to be valued. In this way, the various performances entailed in the game work to shape and define the children’s identities in relation to each other. Not only do the emotions define the identities *within* the game, but assuming a role also means that emotions attached to it stick to the person, and define the person – their body –, beyond the game (Ahmed, 2014; Rosen, 2015). Tahira emerges from the game as a powerful leader, Evie and Claire as resistant and not to be messed with, and Amy and Asya as weakened and inconsequential. The roles of maids and princesses become inscribed onto the children’s bodies (Coffey and Watson, 2014), and define individuals and groups *beyond* the game, invested with certain classed, gendered and raced attributes.

Discussion: towards naming and challenging social class and other differences

Children do not live their social identities in a vacuum, but within the environments of their families, communities and wider environments. This study has focused on young

children's experiences and performances of social class identities within the ambivalent institutional discourses around class (and other aspects of difference) in the school context. It showed that educational staff need to balance a tension of being considerate of children's different social class backgrounds and resources on the one hand, while at the same time not making class-based assumptions and potentially stigmatizing interventions on the other hand. This leads to some sense of insecurity about how to name, talk about and address social class differences within the school. Social class differences become marked on a regular basis in everyday life at school, whether through access to resources, foods, clothes, money, or more subtly through children's differing academic achievements and parental support and involvement. By 'talking away' the issue of class there is a danger of silencing class-based differences, which does of course not lead to a disappearance of social inequalities, but fails to address and challenge class-based dynamics and their relational implications, and has consequences in terms of creating stigma.

Conceptually, this study challenges views of children as passive sponges that soak up classed identities and values. It echoes Bourdieusian approaches that draw attention to how children use their agency to reproduce or challenge existing structures. By drawing on feminist poststructuralist approaches that stress the discursive and situated nature of identities, I have showed how children evoke different class identities through embodied, emotional and normative performances.

Such performances are based on investing different identities with hierarchical values and status – class-based, and intersecting with gender, race, ethnicity etc. – and come to construct both individual identities as well as wider social groups. This means that

both practice-oriented and academic discussions about children's social class identities cannot take place without talking about other aspects of their identities – gender, race, ethnicity etc. There is a risk of slipping back into more comfortable discussions of 'diversity' and multiculturalism, at the expense of naming and challenging inequalities based on class, race or gender (Kustatscher, 2015; 2016). Intergenerational relationships are very important, and the findings have illustrated how the power of the children's performances circulates in ways that involve not only children, but also adults.

For practitioners, engaging critically with social class differences in primary school means negotiating a balance of both challenging and addressing class-based inequalities (e.g. children's lack of food) while at the same time making sure that normative positions of teachers and children do not marginalize children who do not fit into dominant identities. In practice, this requires a reflexive stance in relation to questions such as teachers' own class backgrounds, classed assumptions and values in curriculum and practices (e.g. how are children's/parents' snack choices evaluated? What expectations exist about homework practices?), and relationships with parents (e.g. which parents are invited to accompany the class on a school trip?). Crucially, children actively engage in the performance of social class and other differences, and this means that they are indeed competent to be involved in discussions about identities, inequalities and exclusion.

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